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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 AMMAN 000626

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TAGS: [KISL](#) [PTER](#) [KPAO](#) [SOCI](#) [JO](#)  
SUBJECT: ELECTRONIC JIHAD: MAINSTREAM ISLAMIST WEBSITE  
SEEKS TO COUNTER EXTREMIST WEB MEDIA

Classified By: Ambassador David Hale for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: A year-old Jordanian web site, Islamouna, conveys strong criticism of U.S. foreign policy in Iraq and the Middle East, while simultaneously criticizing al-Qaeda and takfirism for "distorting Islam" and "confusing Muslims about their religion." According to Islamouna's editor, the site seeks to counter Islamic extremist web-based media while maintaining credibility as a truly Islamist outlet. The editor says the website's viewership has grown significantly in the past several months, registering over 60,000 hits each month, while witnessing a doubling of the number of on-line discussions linked to the site's articles. As a sign of Islamouna's growing viewership, the editor said that on-line criticism against him and his website from extremist groups has also increased. The website's founders believe extremist voices on the internet view Islamouna's mainstream, anti-terrorist Islamist message as a threat. Stating that anti-extremist Islamist web-based media is still in its infancy in Jordan, Islamouna's editor said he hopes his website will spur mainstream Islamists in Jordan to use the internet in what he calls "the media battle against al-Qaeda." END SUMMARY.

ELECTRONIC JIHAD: "ISLAMISTS NEED TO FIGHT AL-QAEDA ON THE WEB"

¶2. (C) Marwen Shehadeh, who helped start the Islamist website Islamouna over a year ago and currently manages the site's content, told us on February 20 that his website is registering over 60,000 hits each month, and has recorded a two-fold increase in on-line discussions linked to the site's articles in what he described as "a significant growth of our readership in the last several months." Financially supported by the Jordanian media group "Haqiqa" (Fact), which runs a weekly Jordanian newspaper with a moderate Islamist bent, Islamouna was created "to present a counter to al-Qaeda and takfiri web-based media." According to Shehadeh, "those of us who set up this website believed that the time was right to fight al-Qaeda on the web, because unfortunately the terrorists were winning the electronic media jihad and the rest of the media was not having an impact."

¶3. (C) Operating out of a small office above an antique shop in the Sweifieh district of Amman, Shehadeh asserts that Islamouna is the "first and largest" moderate Islamist internet media site in Jordan. Islamouna's five-member board of directors includes several academics from the University of Jordan including its Dean of Sharia, and the site stresses its Islamist credentials. "We are clear that we are Islamists. We believe that religion plays an important role in life," said Shehadeh. "But we also believe that harming innocents is wrong, and that extremists do not have the right to tell other Muslims they are not practicing their religion the right way. This is why we oppose al-Qaeda and takfiris."

¶4. (C) Describing itself as "a network of independent Islamic

thought," Islamouna runs a variety of stories on its website, ranging from news articles about the reprinting of controversial cartoons in Danish newspapers to debates on social mores in Muslim countries. It recently ran an article criticizing the Egyptian government's position against the Muslim Brotherhood, claiming that the government is effectively banning the Islamist organization's use of the slogan "Islam is the solution." The website features links to Islamic educational sites, including descriptions of prayer rituals and Islamic holidays. The site also runs a ticker entitled "Cost of the war in Iraq" featuring an ever-increasing dollar figure, and recently ran a poll asking "Who Should American Muslims Vote for in the US Elections." The choices included the top Democratic and Republican candidates, followed by the option: "None. They are all against Islam."

15. (C) Stressing that it is "independent" and "non-official," Islamouna wants its readers to know that it is backed by neither the Jordanian nor western governments. Drawing a comparison to U.S.-backed television and radio stations, Shehadeh said "when our stories and posts criticize takfiri or other extremist ideology, we are clear that we are not doing this because the government or the Americans support us."

#### ISLAMIST CREDENTIALS ARE KEY TO SUCCESS

16. (C) Islamouna's supporters believe the site's independent and Islamist credentials are the key to its growing popularity. Shehadeh said that he takes care to ensure that readers of his individual posts know that he is "opposed to U.S. policy in the region, including the unlawful occupation of Iraq." Shehadeh's on-line criticism of Iraqi tribal

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leaders who are cooperating with coalition forces led Sheikh Ali Hatem, a high-profile tribal figure from Anbar Province, to call Shehadeh "an al-Qaeda supporter" on al-Arabiya television. "I went to Ali Hatem's uncle in Amman, and I asked for and received an apology," Shehadeh added. However, he points to the episode as proof of his independence. "Our readers know that even though I criticize al-Qaeda, that does not mean I will support the occupation of Arab land and our readers support me for this," he said.

17. (C) Articles and advertisements on the website prominently feature Islamist themes, including support for Palestinian rights and statements from religious scholars about the importance of remembering religious teachings in daily life. Its promotional material displays photographs of the holy mosques in Mecca, Medina, and Jerusalem. Shehadeh said that Islamouna's founders believe that what makes them different from other anti-extremist voices is that "nobody can question our commitment to Islam." He said the Jordanian government has largely left the website alone, but that Islamouna's independent nature poses challenges for the site. "The government can still restrict content, and there are times that websites that we linked to have been shut down," he claimed. Shehadeh said his personal relationships with officials in the Jordanian security services has helped him. "I have known some of the anti-terrorism officials in Jordan since they were lieutenants, and I freely give them advice about what we need to do to stop al-Qaeda," he claimed.

#### GROWING READERSHIP LEADS TO INCREASED CRITICISM FROM SOME

18. (C) Shehadeh asserted that as Islamouna's viewership has grown in the last several months, so too has on-line criticism of the site and its founders by extremist voices on the internet. "Al-Qaeda and the extremists have their own internet media, and it has a lot of reach. We are seeing them criticize us now, and I have even been threatened," he explained. Shehadeh said that he aggressively defends himself from on-line criticism by extremists, stressing an anti-takfiri message. "I tell them what every Muslim knows -

that under Islam no one has the right to tell another Muslim he is not practicing his religion correctly." Shehadeh described examples of on-line debates he has engaged in with representatives from extremist websites over Islamouna's content, and said that the language often becomes heated. He views the criticism, however, as evidence of the extremists' concern over Islamouna's "legitimacy and popularity in Jordan."

¶9. (C) Islamouna's founders hope that the website's popularity will galvanize other mainstream Islamists in Jordan. "We believe we are the first and largest moderate Islamist internet media site in Jordan. We are always talking to similar sites in Lebanon and Saudi Arabia, for example, and we are trying to build a network," Shehadeh said. Acknowledging that anti-extremist Islamist web-based media is still in its infancy in Jordan, Shehadeh expressed confidence that other anti-extremist Islamists will emulate Islamouna's model and take their voices to the internet. "As more people hear about us, as more people see that we are expressing our opinions freely and speaking the truth, you will see more voices follow," he concluded.

¶10. (C) COMMENT: Islamouna is one example of the growth of web-based media in Jordan. Islamouna claims its distinct nature comes from its simultaneous commitment to Islamist themes and readiness to criticize extremist ideology. The site's "moderation" does not come from its stance towards U.S. policy, but from its opposition to Islamic extremists. Despite its willingness to criticize al-Qaeda and takfirism, the site harshly criticizes U.S. involvement in Iraq, U.S. foreign policy in the region, and Israel. With the site claiming a large increase in readership, Islamouna exhibits the potential to become a significant internet media outlet for Islamist voices that oppose terrorist groups. Other Jordanian efforts at promoting moderate Islam on the web include the Amman Message website that is linked to most of the websites of Jordanian government institutions (to be reported septel). While it remains to be seen whether Islamouna will spur the creation of other independent and anti-terrorist Islamist media sites, its founding and subsequent growth illustrates that the media battle between extremists and mainstream Islamist voices on the internet is underway in Jordan. END COMMENT.

¶11. (C) BIONOTE. Marwen Shehadeh is married with several children. Shehadeh said he was educated in Jordan as a journalist, but has only re-entered the field in the last several years working with the editors of "Haqiqa." He was nominated by a local NGO for participation in a State Department-sponsored cultural exchange program last year, but

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he said he was not able to participate in the program because his visa was not approved. END BIONOTE.  
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